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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic study, which calls for tape-recorded interview data, requires a means of interpreting such data. One manner of interpretation is the fairly typical approach of providing descriptive and interpretive accounts of the persons who populate particular social scenes. Excerpts from or transcripts of recorded interviews are often used to support the accounts. A second, more playful method of interpretation approaches the production of ethnography and the use of interview data as an opportunity to experience an elevated state of awareness and a deepended understanding of what it is to live lives and make sense. While the former method creates an intrusive power relationship with the interviewer in control, the latter considers the process as if the participants were co-authoring the text/interview. Both enthographer and informant can elevate their minds, to become co-writers of a personal essay that is an ethnography of mind. (A sample ethnography is included; 15 references are attached.) (SG)

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CONSTRUING INTERVIEW DATA AND RE-PRESENTING THE "OTHER"

The purpose of this essay is to make some remarks about construing tape-recorded interview data, and to consider certain issues pertinent to re-presenting the "other" as "other" in ethnographic accounts.

The following discussion is divided into two sections. The first section illustrates a fairly typical way of construing and using interview data. The second section explores a more playful and less orthodox approach to the use and interpretation of interview data. Both sections include commentary about the relationship between the researcher and the person interviewed/informant, and some of the implications of this relationship with regard to how the informant or person interviewed is depicted in ethnographic accounts. The transcripts used for this discussion were made from interviews I conducted while studying a Taoist commune in Colorado (Crawford, 1983).

The mechanics of making tape-recorded interviews in the field are relatively straightforward. Common sense and practice typically yield a quality recording that can then be transcribed and interpreted. There is a great deal of guidance when it comes to these matters. See, for example, the manual prepared by Edward D. Ives (1980). It is assumed that a quality recording has been made and that a transcript of this recording has been prepared. This transcript is now ready for use in the preparation of an ethnography.

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1

A typical task of the ethnographer is to provide descriptive and interpretative accounts of the persons who populate particular social scenes. This is done, obviously, because to create an understanding of particular social scenes it is necessary to know something about the people who constitute and animate them. Conducting and recording interviews is a valuable materials gathering process for the ethnographer and a way of getting a sense for the people and social life being studied. Excerpts from the recorded interviews/transcripts are usually used to enrich the descriptive and interpretive accounts of an ethnography. Consider the following example from my study of a Taoist commune, deliberately written in the present tense.

*

Certainly, one of the most credentialed individuals to appear at the compound gate is Robert Michaels (all person and place names are pseudonyms). As an undergraduate he attended New College, an experimental school in Florida. He then studied at Oxford on a two-year fellowship, completing the thesis begun there at Indiana University. Son of a professor of law he too is an attorney, graduating from Yale Law School in 1974 and practicing in Los Angeles for three years prior to petitioning for a leave of absence and the journey that eventually brings him to Settled Heart (the Taoist commune). A string of complimentary adjectives are easily attributed to Robert Michaels. He is young

(31 at the time of our conversation), athletic, articulate, handsome, humorous, good-natured, and intelligent. Perhaps this is why Betty (another commune member) attempts to seduce him. Robert assimilates into the commune naturally and well.

Robert respects Tao-jen and is eager to try the living style he advocates. During his stay he emulates the commune's co-founder by involving himself, in his own way, in the three practices Tao-jen attributes to Taoist monasteries; that is, in Robert's words: "the magic pill niacin, the bath meditation, and the walking meditation." Robert considers himself an "experimental person" so one afternoon he draws a bath and meditatively watches the water drop into the tub, immersing himself in the pattern of ripples and merging with the pleasing, dripping sound. He hikes the mountain, finding himself naturally drawn to the summit and he takes niacin because it is recommended, suggesting it "may contribute to the laid-back aspect of the environment" at Settled Heart.

Robert's behavior is consonant with the "radical change of perspective" he seeks; his receptivity stems from motivational factors culminating in his presence in the commune.

> Quite apart from the Taoist nature of this community, I wish to have a radical change of perspective. Let me repeat that word -- perspective. My last few months in Los Angeles were, for personal reasons, emotionally harrowing. I'd...

> ahh... grown out of a relationship with a woman and towards the end of my time at my office my work was not satisfying to me. One of the reasons it was not satisfying to me was because I was phasing out of it and just the nature of the work is if it's not intense, it's not quite as much fun. So, I was ready for... some opportunity to reorient my perceptions of myself and to get in a more consistently intimate contact with parts of myself that the ordinary course of my professional life has not permitted me and the extraordinary course of my emotional life had made very painful.

It is the biographical sketch of Tao-jen in his translation of the Tao Te Ching that first alerts Robert to the existence of the Settled Heart commune. Reading and comparing several translations of this classic to discover its meaning, he is "impressed" with Tao-jen's rendering. Consequently, Robert writes a letter of inquiry concerning a visit. The form letter he receives in reply mentions the creation of a "one-hundred family village" and encourages him to stay for more than a few days should he make the trip to the commune. Roughly a year and a half elapse between the receipt of this letter and the opportunity to be a resident. Robert's interest in intentional communities and his intrigue with Taoism are conveniently combined in Settled Heart.

Robert is vague about how long he expects to remain in the commune. He likes to characterize himself as "a leaf in the wind." A passport in hand and enough money to go anywhere and do just about anything brings him an intense feeling of exhilaration and freedom. So, even though he is strongly attracted to Taoism and a way of living represented by Settled Heart, Robert also realizes that his place, like it or not, is in the secular world. He is not going to say goodbye to friends, relatives and business associates and go off "into the Taoist sunset." Robert is drawn by a social role that precludes a reclusive life.

> I feel a pull "out there" that represents to me a legitimate nonalienated social role. I asked Tao-jen today if he thought there were any Taoists in the concrete, aluminum, glass high-rises.... and he said: "Yes, no question. There's a 101 year old blind Chinese banker." Role models I am not going to find! Sooo, I've gotta, I guess... create my own and maybe be somebody else's... role model. But there just doesn't seem to be one. Tao-jen's not my role model. The senior partners in my firm are not role models. Ahh... sooo... I think... I will try to achieve balance by... remaining in the secular world, mostly. And... meditating. Doing my t'ai chi. Maybe forming a household in San Francisco... that will nurture Taoist, the Taoist

> mode of life. Ahhh... and... ahh... find my stillpoint in that context.

Robert's departure from the commune, after a two-week stay, comes as no surprise to anyone, least of all Tao-jen who probably sensed from the day Robert arrived that he was only a visitor -- a special person passing through. Quite different from his usual behavior, Tao-jen makes virtually no effort to persuade Robert to stay.

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This account about Robert Michaels is typical. It illustrates the kind of writing that is commonly considered ethnographic: It contains descriptive statements, interview excerpts, and interpretive remarks. The idea is to tell a story, to create some kind of representation, to make available in some way something about an occurrence or an awareness. And it is assumed that the story can be told, that telling is possible.

For instance, in the example above, Robert Michaels arrives on the compound, participates in commune activities, and departs. Beginning, middle and end. Story telling in its most basic form. Obvious structure. Add to this interview excerpts and the story becomes narrated and animated by Robert Michaels himself. The informant tells his own tale and by virtue of this personal telling, represented by words verbatim from the interview transcript, brings verisimilitude and veracity to the account.

At least this is the accepted view. It seems that interview data and reputable ethnography are closely connected. But I wonder. Is this really the case? Do interviews make the account more true and can the story actually be told?

If the informant is featured by the ethnographer, then interview data -- for example, the spoken and recorded word -- becomes featured as well, and crucial for the kind of understanding that is premised on the belief that the "other" as "other" can tell us what we need to know in order to construct an authentic account of an episode or social structure. The assumption here is that there is something "out there" to discover, and that the informant through testimony can tell us what it is. To doubt this assumption changes the nature of interview data and calls into question some common ideas about what it means to do ethnography.

For instance, it occurs to me that I may too easily construe my perceptions of the "other" in my own terms -- terms that can only be private -- without knowing what I do. Paul Dennithorne Johnston (1989) has asserted that "We experience life autistically, deluded that we communicate" (p. 137). By projecting what I observe "out there" and giving my conclusions some kind of "objective" legitimacy, I make my mind foundational -- it becomes the "great container" of my experience. Even intersubjectivity is a mental consensus that is merely a more subtle form of virtual social reality. But this is fine. I can

live here as well as anywhere and appreciate what Henry Miller (1989) expressed when he wrote

> The situation reached the height of the ludicrous when I suddenly realized one day that of everything I had written about the man I could just as well have written the opposite. (p. 40)

What happens when we say the same of the person interviewed or the informant in the field?

Clifford Geertz (1977) takes us part of the way toward a response to this question with his well-known essay "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding." Geertz's use of the hermeneutic method and the comparison of symbol systems to gradually achieve cultural understanding is effective ethnographic practice. He convincingly argues that it isn't necessary to accomplish extraordinary empathy and identity as an observer in the field to make credible sense of how people do their lives. "The trick," he writes, "is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (p. 482). Geertz does this by "searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms -- words, images, institutions, behaviors -- in terms of which... people actually represent themselves to themselves and to one another" (p. 483). He believes that it is possible to view the experience of others

within the framework of their own ideas (p. 483). And he concludes that "[u]nderstanding the form and pressure of, to use the dangerous word one more time, natives' inner lives is more like grasping a proverb, catching an allusion, seeing a joke -- or... reading a poem -- than it is like achieving communion" (p. 492). This is all well and good.

But my concern and the question I am asking here is: What happens within the activity of ethnographic research and the interpretation of interview data when we seriously consider the idea that there is no native's point of view to be understood poetically or otherwise? It seems to me that this realization by a participant-observer preparing an ethnographic account possesses the possibility of triggering a change of perspective. Let me briefly explain.

To make the ethnographic turn and to participate in the ethnographic enterprise means, if it means anything, paying careful attention to experience. Edward M. Bruner (1986) makes a "critical distinction" between "reality (what is really out there, whatever that may be), experience (how that reality presents itself to consciousness), and expressions (how individual experience is framed and articulated)" (p. 6). He cites Wilhelm Dilthey's assertion that "reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience" (p. 4). Add to this the following observation by Roger D. Abrahams (1986):

> Now that we have begun to move the idea of experience to the center of our concerns... we make it possible to elevate the representative anecdote to the same place of importance as the rite of passage. (p. 70)

The anthropology of experience gives prominence to the stories of life that re-present patterns of living. The representative anecdote, often created from and embellished with interview data, is a point of reference for making sense of human behavior; it is an expression that is evoked from the experience of social reality. It may be argued, then, merely following Dilthey, that an ethnographic account is an invented reality (expression) made from the inner experiences (consciousness or awareness) of the ethnographer. So the idea that there is or can be a native's point of view is invented as well.

If experience may be made into invented reality, then ethnography can transcend itself and encompass more than descriptive and interpretive accounts of human behavior and culture. When this occurs, ethnography becomes evocative (Tyler, 1986) rather than projected or prescriptive, and possesses the possibility of personal transformation (change of perspective) for ethnographer, informant and reader. The account itself becomes a wake-up call like Chuang Tzu's goose that cackled and we are "alerted... to the dangers of both simple talking (descriptive talk with no wake-up call to it) and not talking

(which allows us to fall asleep)" (Allinson, 1989, p. 172). So, doing ethnography can be a particular kind of attentiveness and mindfulness, an elevated state of awareness that allows us to wake up and be present to the business of living lives and making sense.

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Let's return to the interview with Robert Michaels and see what happens when we take seriously the idea that there is no native's point of view, and approach the production of ethnography and the use of interview data as an opportunity to experience an elevated state of awareness and a deepened understanding of what it is to live lives and make sense. This approach is hardly radical but it is somewhat unconventional and it changes, I think, the nature of interviewing informants.

For instance, done in the conventional way, the interviewing process itself is quite intrusive. It is usually the ethnographer who initiates the interview. In the case of Robert Michaels, I made all the arrangements so that we could record our conversation. So in terms of power or influence, there is a lack of symmetry that favors the ethnographer; the informant is like an employee being called into the boss's office.

An alternative approach is to consider the process as if it were the co-authoring of a text/interview. If there is no native's point of view, then there is no reason to attempt to

discover it. Consequently, the interviews conducted and the texts created are just as legitimately initiated by the informant as by the researcher, and the conversation is an opportunity for both ethnographer and informant to elevate their minds. From this perspective, what gets recorded, what is "actually" said, is of secondary importance.

So the idea of ethnographer and informant co-authoring a text/interview is a useful one because it gives the informant the chance to appropriate the interviewing process for personal purposes and balance, to some degree at least, the unequal distribution of power that is inherent in the conducting of field research and the writing of ethnographies. It permits a subverting of the hierarchical nature of a research process that privileges the ethnographer and disadvantages the informant. The act of interviewing someone and writing about it disenfranchises the person being interviewed, even when the language recorded and re-presented is verbatim because the manner of recording it and re-presenting it is decided by the person doing it rather than the person being it. The terms "ethnographer" and "informant" simply label the discrimination that is present.

Michel de Certeau (1984) makes this point in this manner.

> [T]he ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' "success" in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even

> consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of "consumption."
> To a lesser degree, a similar ambiguity creeps into our societies through the use made by the "common people" of the culture disseminated and imposed by the "elites" producing the language. (p. xiii)

You may be thinking that de Certeau's illustration is too extreme for the present discussion, that the ethnographer is hardly a conquistador. But I am not so sure. It seems to me that the game simply becomes more subtle, that our ways of imposing on one another merely become more refined. If this is the case, then the means of subverting the imposition of culture by "elites" through various practices of "consumption" may also be applied to the seemingly innocuous enterprise of conducting field research and writing ethnographies. Therefore, it is

perfectly reasonable to assume that Robert Michaels had his own motives for being interviewed and used the interviewing process itself for his own purposes. The researcher who appreciates this perspective and recognizes that it may exist as a frame of reference for the person participating in the co-authoring of an interview must also, I believe, allow the research outcomes to be subverted accordingly. What this means in each specific case can only be anticipated and speculated about, but in a general sense it should be clear that ethnography of this kind blurs the border between ethnographer and informant and makes of them both co-conspirators in the expression of culture. This is not a new idea but for each person who tries it out it is a new experience and warranted for this reason alone. Personal experience may be the principal influence on the ethnographic enterprise.

Furthermore, although memories are notoriously unreliable, it seems to me that when Robert Michaels and I recorded our conversation I did not experience what happened in the manner I have just described. Instead, I remember being far more occupied with recording his story so I could use it as an account to be interpreted for my own research purposes. But this does not matter. I can look at the transcript of our conversation now, or consider my present recollection of it, and think about this conversation in the ways I have just suggested; that is, I can take an interactional/co-authoring perspective and recast what we talked about according to my personal experience as given me

by my present frame of mind.

For instance, I can bring into play something I have just read and allow it to work in ways that will shape the manner in which I think about what Robert Michaels and I talked about. Again, there is nothing striking or particularly original in this. Ethnographers do it all the time. It is really nothing more than consciously constructing a cognitive frame of reference and then using that cognitive construct or frame of reference to make sense of a selected text. Quite often, however, we tend to represent this process as carefully thought out before hand so that the interpretations we render give the impression of being meticulously construed according to some solidly designed research protocol. What I am suggesting is more spontaneous (some will say reckless or careless) and possibly "post" or "post-post modern" in that coherence and correspondence as these terms are commonly used within the context of the typical research enterprise are less important than simple personal experience and expression. Consider the following quotation from a book I am presently reading:

> Moreover, an absolute skepticism is not at all inconceivable. Once we find that a favorite opinion turns out to be false, we can readily think the same of any idea. And if any idea may be false, there is nothing to stop us from fearing that they all are. To be sure, this implies

> that we judge our ideas by a standard -- and a high one at that. But that does not require that we know the standard, only that we hold it, albeit experimentally. If asked whether this is the right standard or not, it is always possible to answer that we do not know. This does not cheapen the skeptical stance. On the contrary, it carries it to its logical extreme. For then we do not even claim to know that we cannot know; we say only that we know not whether we know or not. (Lachs, 1988, p. 28)

A skeptics position -- the idea that we are unable to determine whether we know or do not know -- is a legitimate position for the ethnographer and the informant or the person who is interviewed. It is a point of reference that is not a point of reference. It is one way of making sense of experience that calls into question the entire sense-making enterprise without replacing it with something else. It underscores, I think, the possibility of there being no knowable native's point of view.

Another possibility for interpreting the interview with Robert Michaels is to take the performative turn and dramatize with another actor a recreation of the initial interview with the transcript as script. If Edith and Victor Turner can deepen their insights about the Ndembu of Zambia in Central Africa by having their graduate students perform scripts based on their

fieldwork (Conquergood, 1989, p. 86), then this can serve as precedent and the interview with Robert Michaels can be enacted as well, but for different purposes. In this case, the idea is to simply play the parts with no purpose other than to experience the performance and to speculate about what it means for the performers and their audience, if there is one.

Earlier, I mentioned how ethnography can be evocative rather than projected or prescriptive, and how the process of evoking experience can lead to a change of perspective and personal transformation for everyone. This is where the expression part of doing ethnography becomes especially salient because what is evoked from the fieldnote or interview transcription (or an enactment of it) might possibly be the recollections that are stimulated by a seemingly previous experience. Like P.D. James who creates a main character for one of her mysteries and then moves into this character's mind with an intensity that expands her community like a neighbor next-door, the ethnographer creates out of memory trace and artifact an experience to inhabit and express in that moment. It is a mental act, essentially autobiographical, that is grounded in lived experience regardless of what form its expression may take. Stephen A. Tyler (1986) writes:

> Post-modern ethnography... does not move toward abstraction, away from life, but back to experience. It aims not to

> foster the growth of knowledge but to restructure experience; not to understand objective reality, for that is already established by common sense, nor to explain how we understand, for that is impossible, but to reassimilate, to reintegrate the self in society and to restructure the conduct of everyday life. (p. 135)

It may have been R.D. Laing (Capra, 1988) who asserted that all we can do is depict our experience. Tyler's (1986) idea about restructuring experience to reassimilate and reintegrate the self in society is consonant with Laing's assertion; that is, the restructuring of experience is a kind of depiction. When the ethnographer interprets the transcription of an interview or in some way takes into account the testimony of an informant, the interpretive process itself is a depiction of personal experience and this depiction, in turn, is a way to re-enter the culture or the society and restructure the conduct of everyday life. It is also possible that the ethnographer may actually be attempting to influence personal fate by manipulating commentary about others, which brings us again to the exploitative potential of the ethnographic enterprise and the uneven distribution of power or influence inherent in the conducting of research.

If Laing's assertion is a credible one, if all we can do is depict our personal experience, then it is legitimate to ask: Who speaks for the informant? Who speaks for the person who is

interviewed? From what has gone before, it must be answered that it is not the ethnographer who gives authentic voice to the informant or the person interviewed. All an ethnographer can do is construe an interview or interpret testimony in a way that represents or re-presents the "other" as "other." And even the argument based on analogy -- the idea that if I have this experience in these circumstances, then maybe you do too -- does not change this. I still cannot speak for you, the informant or the person who is interviewed. I still cannot express your experience. Thus, we have arrived, perhaps, at a point where the dictum of early Wittgenstein (1929) holds sway: "Whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent" (pp. 187-189). So, in the end, if I choose to not remain silent, what Robert Michaels and I may do when I construe the transcript of our interview is become co-writers of a personal essay -- an ethnography of mind.

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